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# **Western Architectural Influences in the Court of Siam 1851-1925**

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the requirements for the degree of  
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# Abstract

This thesis examines the use of Western architecture in the design of the permanent and summer palaces of King Rama IV, King Rama V and King Rama VI of Thailand. It is a study of the use of interior spaces, and how the Kings and their families responded to their adapted Western interior environments, and how they maintained traditional ideas and practices in their daily lifestyles between 1851 and 1925.

The story by Anna Leonowens – *The King and I*; is a popular account of how The Court of Siam responded to Western influences. In the novel, the story (although particular contents were fabricated) explained that King Rama IV took on the fundamental concepts of Western lifestyle and etiquette, and emphasised these with the use of Western architecture. He built a summer palace with interiors based on traditional and Western styles. The palace was used for relaxation and for accommodating foreign diplomats. His acceptance of Western ideals later influenced his children's lifestyles, particularly that of King Rama V.

King Rama V maintained the significance of Western ideals in his palaces, and was even more enthusiastic than his father about Western influences. King Rama VI's personal lifestyle, however, was based on traditional ideals rather than Western rituals. His residences were designed in a different manner from his father's palaces. These differences indicate that each King had their own approaches on the maintenance of Western ideas and practices.

The thesis focuses on the relationships between the use of different architectural styles for the interior design of individual palaces, and the adaptation and utilisation of interior space by the residents in order to fulfil social and political events, as well as their daily domestic rituals.

## Acknowledgements

Great contributions were made by people interested in this thesis. The research methods involved participation from a variety of individuals. Captain Arvot Urn-chukin of the National Department of Arts and Assistant Professor Ardisort Mockpeemai from the Department of Arts and Humanities of Thammasat University provided useful information and personal comments on Siamese architecture, Western influences and common difficulties on the lifestyle of the royal families. The researcher wishes to thank Mrs. Nongluck Srivipatana, a teacher from Thailand who provided a great selection of books and documents on the palaces. The researcher also wishes to thank palace officials and staff of Phra Nakhorn Khiri, Vimanmek Palace, Phra Ram Ratchaiwet, Marugadhaiwan Villa and Bangkhunprom Palace for providing a helpful guide to these palaces. Thanks also to Joe Brooks for always giving the researcher friendly advice. Most of all, thanks to the researcher's family for making everything possible.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

Man lives in a symbolic environment, as well as a physical environment.<sup>1</sup>

Environments were important to the lifestyle of Siamese royal families during the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century to the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century. The influences of different ideas and social processes from Western countries allowed Siamese royal families of these periods to adopt such practices as part of their lifestyles. They considered these influences as new possibilities which could enable them to show Westerners their competence in living and socialising in their adopted Western environments.

In order to create Western environments, the utilisation of Western architecture on royal palaces of King Rama IV (1851-1868), King Rama V (1868-1910) and King Rama VI (1910-1925), was significant in terms of behavioural adaptations. These form a hypothesis, which states : the influences of Western European architecture were evident in the design of Siamese palaces, and these created an impact on the variation in traditional beliefs and lifestyles of the occupants during 1851-1925.

To study the relationship between the use of Western architecture on royal palaces and the lifestyle of the occupants, personal visits to King Rama V's Phra Nakhorn Khiri, King Rama V's Vimanmek Palace and Phra Ram Ratchaniwet, King Rama

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<sup>1</sup> Rose, Arnold M. **Human Behaviour and Social Processes**. London : Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962. Page 5.



VI's Marugadhaiwan Villa and the residence of Prince Paribatra – Bangkhunprom Palace were made to videotape, as well as to photograph, the interior spaces of the palaces. The study of the historical backgrounds was also carried out by consulting with palace officials and historians while visiting the palaces. The benefit of having the palace officials guide people to most of the interior spaces was that the functional nature of each space could be observed simultaneously while videotaping the space. This method helped to emphasise the relationship between spatial planning and interior decorations. The nature of interior settings as they were utilised by the occupants, illustrates the functions and indicates the status of occupants who would normally use the rooms.

General and specific information on the lifestyle of the royal occupants, as well as certain difficulties that influenced the utilisation of their adopted Western interior environments were gained by consulting with selected Thai educators. Captain Arvot Urn-chukin and Assistant Professor Ardisort Mockpeemai,<sup>2</sup> were two of the educators whom provided their personal views on Siamese lifestyle, as well as the relationship between Western architecture and the methods used by the occupants when they were arranging interior spaces for their social and household activities. Specific issues, such as a lack of electricity when the occupants of Bangkhunprom Palace were using chandeliers as part of their daily aesthetic settings, seem irrelevant to theories of interior design and socio-spatial behaviours of the Siamese occupants. Nevertheless, these were used as background information in terms of spatial usage and adaptations.

The description of socio-spatial functions of Siamese traditional and Western interior spaces was defined by the way the royal families utilised their space. The differences between the traditional and Western demarcated spaces are discussed throughout the thesis in a way that is related to the adaptation of spaces by the utilisation of Western

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<sup>2</sup> Assistant Professor Ardisort Mockpeemai. The Faculty of Arts and Humanities : Thammasat University, Prachan Road, Bangkok 10200 THAILAND.

furniture and objects. Typical examples of traditionally designed interior spaces were the throne halls and the open platforms of both King Rama IV's Phra Nakhorn Khiri and King Rama VI's Marugadhaiwan Villa. The prominence of such traditional spaces was emphasised by the height of the ceilings and the size of an open space that was utilised for only one or two functions. These spatial attributes, to a certain extent accentuated the role of the King who lived in the palace, because his audience could only behave by following certain etiquette as a single group since there was no distinct separation of space evident within the room. Thus, the evidence of traditional spaces in the palaces of King Rama IV and King Rama VI was a prominent feature of their spatial functions, whereas the significance of interior spaces in King Rama V's palaces was defined by the size of the space, and the furniture utilised within the room rather than the physical nature of the building.

The role of the Kings also helped in defining the behaviour of their families and male entourage within the space. Traditionally designed interior spaces in King Rama IV's Phra Nakhorn Khiri and King Rama VI's Marugadhaiwan Villa enabled their family members and entourage to use the space primarily in a traditional fashion where they were allowed to sit around the Kings in a group configuration. This particular gesture imitated how Siamese laymen and noblemen were using their spaces when there was a person of high social status sharing the same area.

King Rama V utilised his interior spaces in a similar manner where the occupants were allowed to sit at the same level of seating as the King and in a group formation. However, the differences in terms of socio-spatial function were clearly defined by the evidence of furniture in a way, which was used to assist the occupants' adapted Western etiquette. The functions of traditional spaces in the residences of King Rama IV and King Rama VI could be manipulated in the same manner depending on the circumstances. Therefore, the role of the Kings was emphasised by both the position of their occupants and the function of the interior space, because the Kings always acted as chief member of every social gathering that occurred within their palaces.



The study of design theories and human behaviours led to the subjects of personal and group behaviours, culture and communication, aesthetic values, role-distance, as well as the social and personal boundaries. Therefore, references consulted covered a variety of subjects relating to Siamese and Western architecture, human behaviours and lifestyles of the occupants of each palace. They also included studies of socio-spatial theories. These were applied in relation to the occupants' adopted Western ideas and practices, because the evidence shows that the interior spaces were used in accordance with Western etiquette and ideals in terms of gender, personal status and boundary, as well as back and front regions. Information from palace records on social and domestic activities led to the discussion of how the interior spaces of each palace were adapted and utilised in order to fulfil the occupants' requirements. This also involved understanding the significance of the royal events and rituals in terms of socio-spatial phenomena.

Bill Hillier, author of "Space Syntax" and Julienne Hanson, in their book "The Social Logic of Space"<sup>3</sup> offer a broad discussion on socio-spatial phenomena, which is generally in accord with the findings of this thesis. Most of their examples are of exterior planning in primitive and ancient villages, so while it is interesting to note that similar phenomena can be seen in a wide variety of settings across different cultures, their work does not include the finer details of interior space arrangements and decoration, which is the focus of this study. Other works by Erving Goffman,<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Hanson, Julienne. and Hillier, Bill. **The Social Logic of Space**. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1986.

<sup>4</sup> Goffman, Erving. **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**. New York : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959.

Goffman, Erving. **Interaction Ritual : Essays on Face to Face Behaviour**. London : Allen Lane The Penguin Press, 1967.

Goffman, Erving. **Relations in Public : Microstudies of the Public Order**. London : Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1971.

Goffman, Erving. **Encounters : Two Studies in the Sociology of Interaction**. London : Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1972.

Goffman, Erving. **Behaviour in Public Places : Notes on The Social Organisation of Gatherings**. London : Collier-MacMillan Limited, 1963.

Clovis Heimsath<sup>5</sup> and David Canter<sup>6</sup> provide a more useful socio-spatial theory in which to consider this work on Siamese architectural space.

Several publications on social and personal behaviours by Erving Goffman and Judy Gahagan were the main source on the discussion of how people reacted towards their living and social environments. Goffman made practical comments in his book – *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*,<sup>7</sup> which showed how individuals in social settings would react to their groups and their shared environments. Gahagan<sup>8</sup> on the other hand, looked at how people would organise smaller social settings, such as living areas, in order to interpret the importance of social interactions and the way they were managed. Although Gahagan discussed the subject of social behaviours in a manner that had significant bearing on psychological functions, certain issues on the use of space for conducting social interactions were drawn in relation to socio-spatial arrangements.

Various articles on social behaviours by individual sociologists enabled the study of how people responded to their shared environments in terms of social etiquette, role-distance and aesthetic values, particularly in relation to domestic environments. Goffman's articles on front and back regions<sup>9</sup> were related to the characteristics of communal and personal spaces. The socio-spatial relationship between settings and their occupants was the key to the study of the royal families and their methods on the use of adapted Western spaces in this work.

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<sup>5</sup> Heimsath, Clovis. **Behavioural Architecture**. New York : McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Canter, David. **Psychology for Architects**. London : Applied Science Publishers Ltd., 1974.

<sup>7</sup> Goffman, Erving. **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**. New York : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Gahagan, Judy. **Social Interaction and Its Management**. London and New York : Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1984.

Gahagan, Judy. **Interpersonal and Group Behaviour**. London : Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Goffman, Erving. **The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life**. New York : Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959. Page 106-138.



It is important to acknowledge a recent publication on Thai architecture – Clarence Aasen's (1998) "Architecture of Siam : A Cultural History Interpretation".<sup>10</sup> Aasen's study traces the development of Siamese architecture without particular reference to the relationships between the design of selected buildings, and the behaviour and the rituals of their occupants, and includes very little information on how the occupants of the examples he describes, used the buildings and interior spaces. His discussion of the influence of Western ideals on Siamese architecture is not related to socio-spatial aspects of architecture.

Aasen discussed the significance of Western political influences that made particular impacts on the lifestyle of the royal family during King Naria's reign, in a sense that was clearly contrary to the social and cultural etiquette practised during this reign. Aasen (1998) has pointed out that foreigners played a direct role in assisting the Monarch in controlling the political aspirations of members of the royal family – for example, the princes and princesses, and members of the noble families.<sup>11</sup>

The evidence clearly shows that both King Naria and King Rama IV developed close political and social relationships with foreign diplomats.<sup>12</sup> However, the contingency for noblewomen and their children to establish any social interaction with the diplomats was obviously limited (even though there was 200 a year interval between the two reigns). Such a restriction was made possible by the planning of the royal residences where the inner part of the palace was to be used exclusively by certain individuals. The record shows that the inner part of King Naria's summer palace was planned in a way that permitted only loyal Siamese noblemen to enter.<sup>13</sup> Thus, Aasen

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<sup>10</sup> Aasen, Clarence T. **Architecture of Siam : A Cultural History Interpretation**. New York : Oxford University Press, 1998.

<sup>11</sup> Aasen, Clarence T. **Architecture of Siam : A Cultural History Interpretation**. New York : Oxford University Press, 1998. Page 184-185.

<sup>12</sup> Moffat, Abbot Low. **Mongkut, the King of Siam**. Ithaca; New York : Cornell University Press, 1961. Page 20 and 21.

Pumathon, Puthorn. "Cousin of Gerakis," **Art and Culture** April 1997 : 140-145.

<sup>13</sup> Praipiboonkit, Nongnoch. **Ancient Palaces**. Bangkok : S T P World Media Co., Ltd., 1998. Page 68.

made an assumption that somewhat ignored the significance of traditional decorum practised by the royal families.

Aasen further emphasised the importance of Asian architecture, particularly Chinese, on religious buildings to an extent that appeared to overwhelm the study of Western influences on royal facilities built during the reigns of King Rama IV, King Rama V and King Rama VI. Numerous exterior plans of temples and religious buildings were evident in the book, yet none was related to the permanent and summer residences of King Rama IV, King Rama V and King Rama VI except for aerial plans and a cross-section of an observatory tower of King Rama IV's Phra Nakhorn Khiri.<sup>14</sup>

Aasen overlooked the importance of the use of Western architecture on the design of royal palaces discussed in the thesis, apart from a brief discussion on the construction of King Rama IV's observatory tower in terms of Western technology. The book by Aasen delivers information that emphasised primarily the issues of Asian influences on Siamese religious architecture and exterior plans that indicated no socio-spatial relationships between the building and its occupants. Therefore, an emphasis was focused on a broader-sense in terms of foreign influences on Thai architecture.

The outcomes of the research relate to the hypothesis that Western influences not only impacted on the architectural styles of the palaces, but also the lifestyle and formal etiquette of the Monarchs and their families. The analysis of both Thai records and English publications led to an understanding of the relationships between spatial planning and personal responses to the significant environmental adaptations. The evidence of furniture and personal possessions within communal and personal spaces of the royal occupants shows that objects had specific meanings to the

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<sup>14</sup> Aasen, Clarence T. *Architecture of Siam : A Cultural History Interpretation*. New York : Oxford University Press, 1998. Page 136-137 and 189.

individuals who used them. This relates to Ian Craib's idea (1984) that human beings act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them.<sup>15</sup>

The response of King Rama IV, King Rama V, King Rama VI and Prince Paribatra to Western ideals not only influenced their abilities to conduct personal and social rituals using Western methods, but also involved their families. Their competence in using Western interior settings and etiquette developed as a result of their enthusiasm in adopting a variety of Western influences, including the use of furniture and how it was arranged in order to suit the individuals.

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<sup>15</sup> Craib, Ian. *Modern Social Theory (From Parsons to Habermas)*. Great Britain : Wheatsheaf Books Ltd., 1984. Page 73.